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A different way home: Resettlement patterns in Northern Uganda

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A B S T R A C T

After decades of civil conflict leading to massive internal displacement of people, Northern Uganda is peaceful again and hundreds of thousands of displaced people have returned to the area. Using data from maps and satellite imagery, we examine the placement of homes before, during and after the conflict. Examining two study sites, one that experienced a great deal of violence over an extended period of time and one where the experience of violence was more limited, we observe the clustering of home placement in the post-conflict period. As resettlement occurs, there is also evidence of increased location of homes in close proximity to roads at the site with high levels of violence. This research informs what we presently know about the choices of returnees and has implications for service provision and the reclamation of property rights after conflict.

The conflict in Northern Uganda between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan government began shortly after Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Army (NRA) took control of Uganda in 1986. The NRA was unable to assert complete control over various active insurgencies in Northern Uganda. The most notable of the insurgent groups came to be known as the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces, led by prophetess Alice Lakwena.[1] Following her defeat in 1987, some of its members joined with her father, Severino Lukoyo, in the Holy Spirit Movement and later with her cousin, Joseph Kony, who led the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

While there are differing interpretations of the LRA's motivations, reports from those well-acquainted with the movement identify a political and antigovernment agenda in the actions of the LRA (Dolan, 2009; Finnström, 2008). Regardless of their goals, it is the effect of LRA's violent tactics and the government's response that are the focus of this research project. We will examine the impact of the violence in Northern Uganda on displacement and resettlement patterns. The following article proceeds in five parts. First we give a very brief overview of the conflict and the events which have led to the opportunity for people to return to their homes. In the second section we discuss what we know about resettlement from previous observations of population return after protracted conflicts. Then we present our research design and methodology, a spatial study of resettlement in two areas of Northern Uganda, one which had high levels of violence and displacement; the other with lower levels of violence and displacement. In the following section, which presents our findings, we note changes in settlement patterns at both study sites. In the last section, we address possible explanations for the changes in settlement patterns and the implications for property rights and service provision.

Overview of the Northern Uganda conflict

The conflict between the government and the LRA was one in which civilians were not just victims of collateral violence, but specific targets. In this regard, it is similar to many of the "New Wars" of the twenty-first century in which the displacement of civilians is a strategic goal (Kaldor, 1999). It shares characteristics with conflicts in Congo and Sudan, in which the displacement of civilians is intentional and has occurred in waves over many years of violence. In a survey conducted in 2005 in Gulu, Kitgum, Lira, and Soroti of 2585 respondents in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, 40 percent had been abducted by the LRA, 45 percent had witnessed the killing of a family member, and 23 percent had been physically mutilated at some point during the conflict (Pham, Vinck, Wierda, Stover, & Giovanni, 2005, pp. 1–60). The LRA has gained notoriety for its extraordinarily malevolent practice of abducting minor children to serve as soldiers, servants and sex slaves. In addition to direct violence, local populations suffered from the trauma of displacement and with it, the lack of food and shelter.

Most of the violence took place in the Acholi districts of Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader, but in the later stages of the war, violence also occurred in the Lango sub-region -Apac, Lira and even as far as east

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as Teso. Approximately 1.8 million people were displaced by 2005, comprising ninety-four percent of the population in Gulu and 39.5 percent in Lira (Pham et al., 2005, pp. 1–60). There were two main causes of internal displacement. First, people fled violence as it touched homes and neighbors. Second, the government enacted a policy in some areas (such as Gulu) to move people into camps in an effort to 'protect' the endangered population (Dolan, 2009; Weeks, 2002).[2] The statistic of 1.8 million displaced people encompassed only those who resided in IDP camps and were officially counted, not those who moved to major cities and trading centers for safety.

Beginning in 1996, people in the Gulu district of Uganda were compelled by the government to live in camps to ensure that they were not victims of violence and did not provide support to the LRA (A catastrophe ignored, 2004; Roberts, Ocaka, Browne, Oyok, & Sondorp, 2008). By 2002 the Government extended this policy to the districts of Pader and Kitgum. However, contrary to their articulated purpose, the IDP camps were not safe havens for those living in them. Camp populations were victimized by disease and malnutrition, in addition to continuing, unchecked LRA violence. Instead of staying away from the camps the LRA frequently targeted them for attack (Dolan, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2005). Indeed, for a variety of reasons, life in the camps was not good for those forced to stay there. In interviews conducted by the Refugee Law Project, none of the interviewees had anything positive to report about their experience of life in the IDP camps (Refugee Law Project, 2007a).

Though no formal agreement has been concluded, a tentative peace has existed in Northern Uganda since 2006. Joseph Kony and his band of approximately 2500 soldiers fled Uganda and are currently in Central Africa where they have been pursued by the Ugandan People's Defence Force as well as by US forces. The shift in the conflict's locale has allowed for the gradual resettlement of the displaced. The government has encouraged people to return to their original areas of residence. People who were displaced at various times during the conflict, by their own choice as well as those forcibly displaced by government anti-insurgency strategies, are now going home. In December 2010, it was estimated that only 182,000 IDPs remained in original or decongestion camps (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2010, p. 10).

Post-crisis resettlement studies have tended to concentrate on the administrative aspects of resettlement—the evaluation of state policies, governmental, and NGO repatriation efforts (Allen, 1996; Allen & Morsink, 1994; McDowell & Eastmond, 2002; Pantuliano, 2009; United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees, 2000). Other works seek to articulate the conceptual framework of terms like "home" and "return" in the refugee context (Graham & Khosravi, 1997; Nyers, 2006; Stefansson, 2006; Warner, 1994).

One of the goals of this article is to determine whether the settlement patterns after the conflict in Northern Uganda are similar to those before the conflict. This is an interesting question for a number of reasons. First, while one might expect people to want to recreate their previous lives and re-establish homes where they previously existed, it could also be the case that the trauma of displacement and the duration of the conflict lead people to choose other homes and livelihoods. Second, whether people choose to return to their previous homes has bearing on the property conflicts that will arise and therefore what the demands on local administrative structures will be. Lastly, examining the changes in settlement patterns in Northern Uganda adds to the body of knowledge regarding the effects of long-term conflict in Africa, a particularly important issue given that there are several ongoing regional conflicts which, like that in Northern Uganda, are long in duration, cross national boundaries and displace large numbers of people. Darfur and the conflict in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo are examples.

Historically, the Acholi people in Northern Uganda settled in and around villages with compounds sometimes quite scattered. Girling noted that their spatial organization related to a cultural commitment to patrilineality and primogeniture. Tying the household locational choice to a specific lineage also extended to higher levels of socio-territorial organization (Girling, 1960). Villages settled around the household of the lineage's leader, maintaining a distance from one another which was always within earshot. This arrangement was a collective security precaution in case of the arrival of a threat.

During the violence in Northern Uganda normal life was destroyed. The social fabric of communities and even families was torn apart by experiences of violence, displacement and the abnormality of camp life. As violence escalated in Northern Uganda people either moved into camps or urban areas for protection and in response to government demand. Despite the fact that the causes of displacement in rural and urban zones are identical, the 300,000–600,000 people who have fled into Northern Uganda urban spaces have been excluded from post-conflict recovery discussions and plans, though urban displacement exists under the jurisdiction of international IDP legislation (Refugee Law Project, 2007b; Weeks, 2002, p. 20). This group of displaced people was not counted in the totals that we have noted above and did not receive humanitarian assistance. Yet, the threat of LRA abductions compelled many nearby towns to keep their homes and night-commute into urban areas such as Gulu (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Burgeoning urban populations contrasted with rural areas which were visibly depleted of their population. A 2005 report noted that "Most of the land in the Acholi districts (Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader) lies arid and is overgrown with bush. Villages have been abandoned….." (Pham et al., 2005, p. 15).

Chris Dolan uses the phrase "social torture," to further emphasize the intentionality of the suffering inflicted upon the population by both UPDF and LRA troops during the conflict between 1986 and 2006 (Dolan, 2009). In order to survive in this insecure setting, some IDPs took the initiative to self-protect, sometimes sleeping away from the camp at night out of a fear of LRA attacks on the camp. Poor protection and miserable camp conditions inflicted damage on the integrity of the IDP's social relations. Exposure to violence and sexual activity among minors fostered a generation disconnected with traditional norms of living; the roles of adults also shifted dramatically when removed from their normal livelihoods and contexts (Nannyonjo, 2005).[3] Community elders voiced concerns that delinquency among the youth in the IDP camps would lead to urbanization by creating a generation "unwilling or unable to adjust to normal rural life" (Weeks, 2002, p. 36).

Displacement and return

Research chronicling the return strategies of refugees and displaced people (RDPs) in other contexts indicates that they do not necessarily return to their pre-conflict residence. Instead, many choose to relocate to ensure physical and economic security (Alden Wily, 2009; Bascom, 1996; Jansen, 2010; Kibreab, 2002; Stefansson, 2006). Two general trends describe the voluntary relocation strategies of displaced people. First, returnees tend to relocate near a border or political boundary in order to establish simultaneous access to the resources (land, homes, assistance) available in their original country and the country or location of their displacement. This has been noted in both refugee and internally displaced populations (Kibreab, 2002; Stefansson, 2006). Second, refugees and displaced people tend to gravitate toward urban centers as rural